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ABSTRACT

A recent study showed that high school students who are not planning to attend college full time should combine vocational and academic course work to maximize their success in the labor market. In a study of non-college bound youth (based on the High School and Beyond Survey data) that examined the impact of high school curriculum, grades, and performance on standardized tests on labor market success, the following results were found: (1) taking additional vocational courses is associated with only a small reduction in the number of academic courses taken; (2) taking additional vocational courses is strongly associated with success in the labor market immediately after high school; (3) taking additional academic courses is not associated with higher earnings immediately after high school; (4) taking a combination of 16 or more academic and vocational courses during the last three years of school enabled students to have greater labor market success than taking fewer than 10 such courses; and (5) good grade point averages and standardized test scores generally had mixed effects on labor market outcomes. The study concluded that school administrators should stress that for the 30-40 percent of high school graduates who do not attend college full time, the choice of high school curriculum is one of the most important decisions they will make affecting their success in the labor market following graduation. Counselors can help students select the proper balance between academic and vocational subjects to ensure labor market success, and vocational teachers can help students secure jobs. (KC)

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Education & Employment

Research for the Practitioner

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The Effect of Curriculum on Labor Market Success Immediately after High School

Research Findings

High school students who are not planning to attend college full time should combine vocational and academic course work to maximize their success in the labor market. In a study of non-college-bound youth that examined the impact of high school curriculum, grades, and performance on standardized tests on labor market success, the following was found:

- Taking additional vocational courses is associated with only a small reduction in the number of academic courses taken.
- Taking additional vocational courses is strongly associated with success in the labor market immediately after high school. Compared to students who took fewer than 2 full-year vocational courses, students who took 4 full-year vocational courses in their last 3 years at school—
  - were 23 percent more likely to be employed in the 18 months following graduation,
  - obtained an 8 percent higher wage during this period, and
  - earned 47 percent more in the calendar year following graduation.
- Taking additional academic courses is not associated with higher earnings immediately after high school.
- Taking a combination of 16 or more academic and vocational courses during the last 3 years of school enabled students to have greater labor market success than taking fewer than 10 such courses. The group who took the larger number of courses received a 7 percent higher wage rate, earned 24 percent more income, and were 2 percent more likely to be employed. Other findings were that good grade point averages and standardized test scores generally had mixed effects on labor market outcomes, with some differences between males and females:
  - For females, a good grade point average improved wage rate and earnings; high test scores in mathematics and reading increased months of employment.
  - For males, good grades in vocational courses improved wage rate and earnings; vocabulary and reading test scores had significant effects on employment and earnings.

This study was based on an analysis of the High School and Beyond Survey data. The three labor market outcomes were earnings in 1981, number of months employed between June 1980 and February 1982, and average hourly wage rate during that period.

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Implications

School administrators should be aware that for the 30-40 percent of high school graduates who do not attend college full-time, the choice of high school curriculum is one of the most important decisions they will make affecting their success in the labor market following graduation.

Academic and vocational education are complementary; students not bound for college should not concentrate entirely on one or the other. Counselors can help students select the appropriate balance between academic and vocational education that prepares them for labor market success. Counselors can encourage youth to take 4 full-year vocational courses in addition to the core academic courses needed to ensure competence in basic skills.

School administrators should devise ways for non-college-bound students who choose not to concentrate in a vocational subject to receive job referral assistance from one of their high school teachers. One of the reasons why vocational students do so much better in the labor market than the students who take no vocational courses is that vocational teachers are more likely to give their students job referrals. This role of the vocational teacher is a very important one. Although counselors can help teachers accomplish this objective, the responsibility for placement should remain with the teacher.

Additional Information

The final report, written by Suk Kang and John H. Bishop, is titled "The Effect of Curriculum on Labor Market Success Immediately after High School." A brochure giving the results of the study (Research You Can Use, No. 4) is available at no charge. To request the brochure or information on the availability of the final report, contact the National Center's Program Information Office toll free at 800-848-4815 or 614-486-3655 (in Ohio and outside the continental U.S.). Cable: CTVOCEDOSU/Columbus, Ohio. Telex: 8104821894.

This is the sixth of a series of eight "research briefs" highlighting findings of studies on education and employment conducted by the National Center and sponsored by the National Institute of Education. The summary was prepared by Ruth Gordon of the Resource and Referral Service.

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Classroom materials based on this research will be available in 1986. Contact the National Center's Program Information Office for availability of unique new materials in THE EMPLOYER'S CHOICE series, a package for teaching students successful techniques for getting and keeping jobs.

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